

## Remarks on Congressional Action on Education Legislation and an Exchange With Reporters

September 30, 1997

*The President.* I have said that I had no higher priority than getting our children the best education in the world in the 21st century and that to achieve that politics must stop at the schoolhouse door. I'm committed to making sure every 8-year-old can read, every 12-year-old can log on to the Internet, every 18-year-old can go on to college, every adult can continue to learn through a lifetime. And we have made significant progress in our efforts to strengthen, improve, and hold more accountable public education.

As Congress continues to debate the education bill this fall, it's become clear that there are some who are waging an effort to undermine our commitment to public education and our public schools. First, the Senate has passed an amendment that would virtually close the Department of Education and abolish some of its most successful efforts to expand school choice and charter schools, to bring computers to every classroom, to create more safe and drug-free schools.

Second, the House of Representatives has actually voted to prevent our country from setting high standards of academic excellence with voluntary national tests to ensure that every child masters the basics in reading and math. I will veto any legislation that damages our commitment to public education and to high national standards. I am pleased that our effort on standards has received strong bipartisan support in the Senate, and I intend to continue this fight for as long as it takes.

Third, in a vote to occur today, some in Congress would diminish our country's commitment to public education by siphoning badly needed funds away from our public schools into a voucher program that would support private academies for a very limited number of students.

Ninety percent of our children in America attend public schools. Our public schools do face a host of challenges. Every city especially faces problems with large numbers of poor children and often old facilities and other difficult challenges. But the answer, the answer is to put competition, change, excellence, accountability

back into the public school system, not to take limited funds away from it.

The District of Columbia has some very good public schools, and others that are not performing as well as they should. We can have more competition there and more options for parents and children without abandoning the schools through public school choice and greater use of charter schools. I have worked very hard on these things for the last several years and will continue to support them.

But instead of abandoning our schools, we should continue to support proven reform efforts, including getting more parents involved, improving teaching, getting drugs out of the schools, getting more discipline in the schools, raising the standards so that we can hold teachers and principals, schools, and students accountable.

Public schools are the cornerstone of our democracy. We have always recognized our common responsibility for preparing all our young children for the challenges of the future. I call upon Congress to challenge our public schools, to change our public schools, but not to walk away from them.

Thank you.

### *Internal Revenue Service*

*Q.* Mr. President, what are your concerns about a credibility or confidence crisis for the IRS, and what do you think about this Republican idea for an independent board for oversight?

*The President.* Well, first of all, I think some very important things came out of those hearings to which the IRS has to respond. There has been some response already. But let me back up a little bit and say we have been working to professionalize, not to politicize, the IRS for the last several years. I signed the Taxpayer Bill of Rights about a year and a half ago. We established an IRS modernization board to improve technology and customer service.

One of the things that I asked my staff to find out for me after the hearings were held is, how many of the abuses that were reported occurred before the Taxpayer Bill of Rights was

passed? How many, if they occurred after the Taxpayer Bill of Rights was passed, were a violation of those law's requirements? And then, where are we going to go from here? That's the most important thing.

For quite a long while now, the Vice President and Secretary Rubin have been working on a project, part of the Vice President's National Performance Review, to change and improve the IRS, and Secretary Rubin will have some more to say about that later. But we believe that we have to respond to what was said.

There were some difficult issues posed, and you have pointed out some of them in your reporting. But I think that we should continue to press ahead with change. But I think it's very important that all the American people have confidence that they're going to be treated fairly and that taxes will be collected in a fair, nondiscriminatory, and nonburdensome manner, and that we will not have any kind of abuse there. And so we intend to push ahead.

Q. But are you concerned that the Government's tax collecting agency faces credibility and

confidence problems because of the specter of those hearings?

*The President.* Well, I think they raise some legitimate points that ought to be responded to. I believe the IRS is functioning better today than it was 5 years ago. I think it has to improve more. And I think we should not try to sweep any of these problems under the rugs. I followed the hearings with great interest, and I am glad to see that there has been some action based on the evidence that was adduced at the hearings already, and there will be more. But I think it's also important to know that we have done a lot of things to try to make the IRS more accountable, more professional. We can do more. We should not politicize it, and we should not do anything that will in any way call into question whether it's being even-handed or fair in the future.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House.

## Remarks at a Meeting With the President's Advisory Board on Race September 30, 1997

[John Hope Franklin, Chair of the President's Advisory Board on Race, introduced the President and the Vice President.]

*The President.* Thank you very much, Dr. Franklin, members of the board, ladies and gentlemen. First let me, again, thank the board for its willingness to serve. And to those of you who came to Little Rock last week for the 40th anniversary of the integration of Central High, I thank you for coming there. It was a very important occasion, I believe, and one that all of us who were there felt was immensely rewarding.

I want to talk today about how we go forward from here. When I was at Little Rock Central High School, after we had this magnificent ceremony celebrating the 40th anniversary of the event and the original nine students went into the school, I went back outside and spent quite a long while talking to the students and the young people who were there. And all they

talked to me about was how we were going to go forward. And I just listened to them.

I think you made a very important beginning by urging that we focus on education and economic opportunity, things which cut across racial lines but are necessary to bring us together.

One of the young men in the audience said to me that—he said, “I don't think they had these gang problems 40 years ago, and I'm worried about that now.” It was very touching, you know. So I think it's very important that we throw this into the future now, we begin to focus on it, and I agree that we should begin with education and economic opportunity.

But if I could go back to the original mission of the board, I also think it's important that we have the facts. So this afternoon, I know you're going to hear from noted scientists and demographers who will share their research on our changing population patterns and attitudes on race, and I think that's an important thing.

Secondly, I think it's important that we continue this dialog. I got as much out of the hour